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East/West politics of race, sexuality and gender

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What to Wear for Whiteness? 'Whore' Stigma
and the East/West Politics of Race, Sexuality and Gender

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Abstract

Drawing on two ethnographic projects, one among Russian-speaking women engaged in commercial sex, the other among young Russian-speaking migrants in Finland, we interrogate how the construct of Eastern European female body is positioned in relation to the norm of (Western) Europeaness and white femininity. We show how Russian-speaking migrant women in Finland learn of their 'Russianness' and 'Easternness' through the circulation of the 'whore' stigma. We analyse these processes of racialisation and sexualisation in the context of the Finnish national project based on gender equality and women's liberation norms. While normative Western Europeaness has recently been constructed through emancipated sexuality and the exclusion of non-Western Others as sexually repressed, the bodies of Russian-speaking women are perceived as sexually excessive and in need of toning down. Focusing on the (self-)policing of Russian-speaking migrant women's bodies and the ways they navigate acceptable and unacceptable forms of gendered self-presentation, we demonstrate how these women are construed as not emancipated enough and hence not quite white. The article thereby contributes to understanding hierarchies of whiteness within the East/West dynamics of race as they pertain to gender and sexuality.

Keywords: *Europe, whiteness, racialisation, sexuality, gender, Russian-speaking women.*

1. Introduction

Racialised markers of Europeaness have been intimately connected with the politics of sexuality and gender (Fanon, 1965; Stoler, 2002; Fassin, 2010). Shifting understandings of normative femininity, masculinity and sexuality have historically been used to define colonial distinctions between Europeaness and othered non-Europeaness. These distinctions are profoundly gendered, as they rely on stereotypes of non-white men and women who are simultaneously sexualised, as racist imageries operate through sexual metaphors and desires (Farris, 2017: 74; Stoler, 2002). Existing literature focuses particularly on the construction of Muslim men as sexual threats and Muslim women as victims (Scott, 2007; Fassin, 2010; Abu-Lughod, 2014). While sexuality has long featured in debates on Europe and coloniality, the position of ostensibly white yet overly sexualised Eastern European women rarely features in these conceptual discussions (see, however, Parvulescu, 2014; Kulawik and Kravchenko, 2019).

Using ethnographic and interview data collected between 2014 and 2016 among Russian-speaking women in Finland, we analyse how they live the violence of racialisation through the 'whore' stigma (Pheterson, 1993), and how racialisation and sexualisation form part of the same process in their lives. Existing research analyses the representation of Eastern European women as excessive, overly sexualised subjects (see e.g. Sverdljuk, 2009; Cvajner, 2011), and often portrays them as victims of trafficking and a patriarchal culture (Farris, 2017: 189; Suchland, 2011; 2018). This article, by contrast, locates their racialisation and sexualisation within a debate on colonial formations of Europeaness, where the 'inferior' position of Eastern Europe in an internal East/West hierarchy exacerbates their sexualisation.

We analyse these processes in the Finnish context, which is characterised by exceptional achievements in gender equality and the ideology of the (in)visible norm of whiteness (Keskinen, 2013). Nordic postcolonial feminists argue that gender equality is central to nation-building in Nordic countries (Bredström, 2005; Keskinen, 2013), and produces ideas of what normative, emancipated femininity is and looks like. The dominant national narrative portrays Finland as innocent of racism and colonialism; yet historical claims to whiteness and belonging to Western civilisation have been substantiated by distancing not only from the indigenous Sámi but also from the 'East' and 'Russianness' (Puuronen, 2011).

We demonstrate that despite their phenotypical 'whiteness', whiteness as a hegemonic structural position is neither invisible nor habitual to Russian-speaking women living in Finland (cf. Ahmed, 2007). The question of gender and sexuality remains relatively under-theorised in research on whiteness and migration (see, however, Lönn, 2018; Leonard, 2008; Lundström and Twine, 2011; Wara and Munkejord, 2018). We contribute to this discussion by showing that unlike the intersections of hegemonic whiteness, migration and gender among Western European women (Leonard, 2008; Lundström and Twine, 2011), Russian-speaking migrant women are denied their place in whiteness as a structure of privilege following migration, and must put effort into converting their ostensible whiteness

into white capital (see also Krivonos, 2018). Clearly, whiteness is not simply a matter of skin pigmentation but a structural position of advantage and privilege intimately tied to the idea of (Western) Europeaness (Bonnett, 1998). Unlike the invisible and ordinary whiteness of the Finnish majority population, Russian women's whiteness is 'degenerate' (Anderson, 2013), as they are racialised as sexually available, less respectable, and not fitting the norm of white femininity. For inclusion in the European project, rather than needing to become available to the male gaze by unveiling, as argued in the literature on Muslim women (Fanon, 1965; Scott, 2007; Farris, 2017), the bodies of Eastern European women must be 'liberated' by toning down their excessive sexuality and femininity in accordance with Nordic norms of gender equality (see also Diatlova, 2019). We argue that these relational processes show how the elusive norm of white femininity is policed by designating racialised, sexualised and gendered Others at different points on a continuum, where a woman's body must be available but not too available for public consumption and the male gaze.

We proceed with an outline of the context of Russian-speaking people's migration to Finland, followed by a conceptual discussion of the colonial formation of Europeaness, whiteness, East/West hierarchies, and how these women reflect on the politics of gender and sexuality. Based on our empirical material, we then move on to discuss how Russian-speaking women learn about their racialisation and try to adopt the norm of white Western femininity. We conclude by outlining our contribution to the discussion on sexuality, gender, whiteness and racialisation.

2. Russian speakers in Finland

Russian speakers account for a quarter of all foreign-language speakers in Finland, and are the largest migrant group (Statistics Finland, 2017). They include people from former Soviet Union republics, mainly Russia and Estonia.¹ Travelling to Finland from Russia and Estonia is relatively easy. Since Estonia is part of the Schengen area and tourist visas for Russians are not difficult to acquire, short trips to Finland are possible (Vuolajärvi, 2018), although stricter requirements for Finnish visas were introduced in 2019. However, for non-EU citizens, residency in Finland is conditional on obtaining and renewing residence permits, often leading to precarious employment relations and dependence on employers (Krivonos, 2015). Marriage migration, a rather common migration route for Russian women (Säävälä, 2010), makes them dependent on their partners for regular residency.

¹ Attitudes toward Russian speakers in Finland are shaped by a shared but turbulent history. Finland was part of the Russian Empire until 1917, followed by a civil war after independence, and in World War II the two countries fought against each other and Finland lost some of its territories. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought a rapid increase in migration from Russia and other post-Soviet countries, and attitudes toward the Russian-speaking population became dominated by contempt. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Finland initiated a repatriation project for so-called ethnic Finns from the region (Davydova-Minguet, 2015). However, the returnees were perceived by the general public as 'Russians', and often faced high levels of discrimination and exclusion (Mannila and Reuter, 2009).

The appearance of Russian-speaking migrants in Finland after the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially Russian-speaking women, is interlinked with fears of criminality and commercial sexuality (Skilbrei and Holmström, 2013; Diatlova, 2016; 2019). Stereotypes of Russian speakers in Finland are inherently gendered: while Russian-speaking men are associated with criminal activity, Russian-speaking women are stereotyped as ‘prostitutes’ and ‘gold-diggers’ (Leinonen, 2012), and most Russian-speaking women seek to distance themselves from these stereotypes (Säävälä, 2010). Scholarly work on marriage migration also demonstrates that class plays a role in migration, and that well-educated Russian–Finnish couples are less likely to face negative stereotypes (Reuter and Kyntäjä, 2006). At the same time, Russian speakers find it difficult to have their skills and education recognised after migration (Krivonos, 2019).

3. Gender, sexuality and coloniality in Europe

Previous research argues that the politics of gender and sexuality have been used as a vantage point to frame ‘modernity’ against ‘tradition’ (Abu-Lughod, 2014; Jacobsen and Skilbrei, 2010; Fassin, 2010; Lönn, 2018). Shifting definitions of gender and sexual norms have been crucial in framing the project of Europeaness, defining variously positioned sexually oppressive or overly sexualised non-white bodies as constitutive Others to Europe and whiteness (Fanon, 1965; Fassin, 2010; Billaud and Castro, 2013).

Postcolonial feminist scholars have demonstrated the entanglement of desire in the colonial conquest with sexual fantasies about non-white Others, as in efforts to unveil Muslim women (Abu-Lughod, 2014; Farris, 2017; see also Fanon, 1965). Scholarly work argues that racist ideologies rely on powerful sexual metaphors and desires, such as dominating the endlessly available bodies of non-white women, while portraying non-white men as dangerous (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1990; Stoler, 2002; Farris, 2017). Black feminist critique extensively explores the portrayal of black women’s bodies as always accessible to white men’s desire, while black men’s sexuality is depicted as uncontrollable and threatening (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1990). Sexuality continues to feature in contemporary European debates on migration (Mepschen et al., 2010); sexual and gender politics are mobilised to restrict migration and regulate borders, constructing non-white Others as a threat to the supposedly achieved gender equality and acceptance of sexual diversity in Europe (Fassin, 2010; Keskinen, 2013). However, critical studies demonstrate that while European sexual democracy narratives serve to mark who is included or excluded from modernity, accepted forms of sexual practices remain limited (Hubbard, 2001).

What is the position of Eastern Europe and the ostensibly white Eastern European women who are constructed as overly sexualised subjects and victims of patriarchal culture in debates on sexual democracy? While there is an extensive body of literature on the construction of Europe’s sexual Others, sexualisation of Eastern European women rarely features in these debates (see, however, Blagojević, 2009; Parvulescu, 2014; Kulawik and Kravchenko, 2019). Yet, as Sara

Farris (2017) reminds us, while current political discourse focuses on male Muslims as oppressors, in the 1990s the figure of the bad immigrant was embodied by the Eastern European man, whereas women from this region were depicted as victims of a backward culture and the sex industry. These representations have hardly changed, as research on the representation of Eastern European women as overly sexualised, traditional and eroticised subjects demonstrates (Stenvoll, 2002; Andrijasevic, 2007; Sverdljuk, 2009; Diatlova, 2016).

We argue that these depictions should be located within a colonially graded understanding of the European space (Boatcă, 2006; Wolff, 1994; Tlostanova, 2012; 2015), which maps onto the politics of gender and sexuality. Discussion of coloniality in the European continent reveals its internal hierarchies, highlighting that the East–West dynamics follow a similar logic to the processes of colonial domination outside Europe (Wolff, 1994). As Manuela Boatcă (2006) argues, East–West distinctions within Europe are embedded in the colonial designs shaping modern world systems. Recent scholarly discussions suggest that Europeanisation in the context of EU enlargement has taken place alongside racialisation and the portrayal of new or potential EU member states as needing assistance to become fully fledged Europeans, including sexual modernisation (Husakouskaya and Gressgård, in this issue; Kulawik and Kravchenko, 2019; see also Suchland, 2018). As Teresa Kulawik (2019: 16) observes, ‘the postsocialist space was turned into a feminist frontier: the Western view posited that “We already have what they are missing”’. Others have pointed out that in the context of EU enlargement, women’s bodies are sites where anxieties about changing symbolic geographies in Europe are played out (Andrijasevic, 2007). At the same time, it is through the symbolic exchange of women and their reproductive labour between East and West that Europe comes into being (Parvulescu, 2014).

Associating Eastern European women with patriarchal oppression and traditional gender norms (Andrijasevic, 2007; Suchland, 2018) has a twofold effect. On the one hand, various commentators and pundits associate sex work with Russian-speaking women in Finland, while assuming that Finnish women are unlikely to be engaged in it (Diatlova, 2016). On the other hand, while Eastern European women are often represented as lagging behind in feminist values, domestic and care work is frequently outsourced precisely to Eastern European migrant women, allowing West European women to participate to a greater extent in non-domestic labour (Rohde-Abuba and Tkach, 2016; Näre, 2012). Russian-speaking women are racialised as a good fit for the gendered economy of care work, and are channelled through employment programmes predominantly into social reproductive sectors (Krivonos, 2019).

To understand the racialisation and sexualisation of Russian-speaking women, we need to problematise their ‘whiteness’ and show how racialisation of whiteness intersects with sexuality and gender. Post-Soviet migrants and migrants from EU accession states must claim whiteness, often unsuccessfully (Krivonos, 2018; Rzepnikowska, 2019; Fox et al., 2012). When examining processes of racialisation by which the ‘whore’ stigma is used against Eastern European female bodies, we take racialisation to mean processes that differentiate people, stabilise

these differences and legitimate power over them (Molina, 2005), based on alleged biological or cultural differences. While Pheterson (1993) suggests that the 'whore stigma' is cast on women as individuals and as a category, and distributed along racial lines, Jacobsen and Skilbrei (2010: 197) add that it is also cast along the lines of national identity.

These processes around whiteness and gender are particularly visible in Finland, characterised by notions of an allegedly homogeneous white nation and exceptional achievements in gender equality that structure its nationhood and discourses around migration (Keskinen, 2013). With the longest non-EU border, Finland can be conceived as a space marking the boundaries of 'civilisation' and Europe. While Finland has defined itself as innocent of racism and colonialism, references to whiteness and Europeanness have been used to claim its belonging to Western civilisation (Vuorela, 2009). Indeed, demarcation from the East and Russia has been integral to the process of constituting it as a Western nation (Puuronen, 2011). And like other Nordic countries, its more recent nation-building project has been based on the values of gender equality. In this context, young migrant women are represented as symbols of the violence and oppression that supposedly characterise families from ethnic-minority backgrounds (Keskinen, 2009; Honkatukia and Keskinen, 2018). Russian-speaking women are also particularly visible as gendered and sexualised subjects in migration debates (Diatlova, 2019).

4. Ethnographic research among Russian-speaking people in Finland

The cases we examine were collected within the framework of two different research projects conducted in Finland between 2014 and 2016. The research participants in both projects came from post-Soviet countries, predominantly from Russia and Estonia. All came from white backgrounds in their home countries. Their experiences varied: some had insecure residency status, such as tourist visas or one-year student residence permits, while others were 'naturalised' Finnish citizens.

Daria Krivonos' case covers young Russian-speaking migrants' experiences of racialisation and negotiations of whiteness following migration to Finland. Her research draws on ethnographic fieldwork among Russian-speaking migrants in Helsinki, and included observations in career counselling, integration and language courses, as well as 54 interviews with young Russian speakers between 20 and 32 years old, of which 20 were male and 34 female. All interviews were conducted in Russian. Although their economic situations might have changed, many participants had experienced downward social mobility due to misrecognition of qualifications and work experience.

Anastasia Diatlova's research focuses on the daily lives of Russian-speaking women engaged in commercial sex in Finland. Her study included 41 semi-structured interviews, as well as participant observation in commercial sex venues and in an NGO offering services to people engaging in commercial sex. 31 initial interviews were conducted, followed by 10 follow-up interviews approximately a

year later to identify any changes in circumstances or opinions. The interviewees were primarily aged 30 to 60, with none younger than 20. They were all Russian speaking, although not all considered Russian to be their mother tongue. They were diverse in terms of ethnic identity and citizenship, coming from Moldova, the Baltic states and Russia. Two interviews were conducted in English, and the rest in Russian. Our interview and observations were analysed using thematic analysis, examining key themes in dialogue with theoretical discussions. We refer to our participants by pseudonyms.

Although the scope and aims of the two projects varied and the studies were conducted independently, we see several overlaps in how the women, regardless of their sources of income, negotiated their femininity and whiteness following migration. While Diatlova's material only included women involved in commercial sex, Krivonos' female participants were often employed in the gendered economy as well, such as care work, cleaning, the service sector and domestic work. Their university education notwithstanding, in Finland they had had few possibilities to valorise themselves as highly educated professionals. As indicated above, Russian speakers tend to lose their social status after migration because of their racialised position as 'migrants', and they often struggle to regularise their migrant status (Krivonos, 2019). In this regard, 'class' and 'racialisation' are co-constitutive categories (see Bhattachayya, 2018).

5. Racialisation as discovery of one's own 'difference'

In this section, we demonstrate how Russian-speaking women learn about their own position in Finland as racialised and sexualised subjects. 'Russianness' is projected onto certain people, and they start to learn the totality of signs that constitute 'Russianness', specifically in relation to femininity. The interview excerpt below exemplifies discovery of one's own racialised, gendered and sexualised position in social space:

When my mom and nephew came for a visit, we went for a walk in the forest with a male friend, we looked like a perfect family. We were passing this all-male group of about 15 people. [...] And from this group, people start shouting 'Hello!' And from 'Hello' they immediately switch to Russian 'Privet!' It was daytime, we're all wearing casual sporty clothes. [...] And then suddenly one of them starts shouting in Russian very loudly, and it echoes through the forest, obviously a Finn in his broken Russian. He shouts, 'How much?' I mean [...] if I were alone, all made up, high heels and a mini skirt. But a family. It's daytime. And he says something like that. Can you imagine?

This episode says a lot about the workings of racialisation as a relational process and external categorisation. In his famous text *The Fact of Blackness*, Franz Fanon (2008: 91) evokes the experience of learning and discovering his own race when a white child on public transport shouted: 'Look! An N!' He conceptualises

racialisation as a violent and relational way to construct bodies: 'the Other fixes me with his gaze' (ibid., 89). Our case can be interpreted as a somewhat similar process, as the cited research participant came to be defined through violent external categorisations. There is nothing essential or uniform about what Russian women look like, but it is the unity of the gaze that defines and constitutes the embodiment of 'Russian femininity'. In the quoted passage, there is an immediate move from the interviewee's identified Russianness and femininity to the 'How much?' question. Her Russianness is instantly tied to commercial sexuality, whereas the interviewee herself emphasises her respectability: she is out for a walk in a forest wearing sporty clothes and is surrounded by what appears to be a nuclear heteronormative family. She is identified as 'Russian' in the public, immediately conjuring up notions of commercial sexuality.

Similarly, acquiring knowledge considered 'essential' for living in a foreign country, such as language skills, leads to further realisation of one's own racialised position. While language skills are expected to strengthen one's belonging to the Finnish nation, they are also a way of learning how the majority population talks about others:

I went away [to Finland], became pregnant. [My new Finnish husband] kept mumbling something at me. I didn't even understand most of what he was saying to me. [...] Then the child was born. And that's how I learnt Finnish, unfortunately. [...] Unfortunately, because then I began to understand what he was mumbling. And as I began to understand, that led to a divorce. [...] [His child from a previous marriage] kept calling me a 'whore' all the time. And I decided, if they call me a whore, then let it at least be true.

This example can be used to problematise the 'integration' paradigm suggesting that members of established ethnic communities are expected to become gradually incorporated into the dominant majority's values and habits. As the interview quote demonstrates, increased participation in the 'mainstream culture' by acquiring language skills actually strengthens attachment to identities of racialised difference. As argued by Valluvan (2018), racism should not be considered as a process that impedes integration, but as a phenomenon enfolded in integration itself. We may add that racialisation, gendering and sexualisation form part of the same process in Russian-speaking women's lives.

Similar to those describing experiences of being defined through the 'How much?' question and 'whore' references, Anna described her experience of being looked at relating to sexualisation of her body:

Even though I wear comfortable shoes with heels, here people still look at me. [...] Once I was wearing black tights, black boots and a short dress, it was of a school style, I think I looked quite modest. But people looked at me in a strange way. But I thought it was fine as only my legs were naked in this look.

Anna emphasised the modesty of her appearance and her awareness of how much of the body she could and should be revealing. Although policing of the female body across this continuum can be regarded as a general female experience, classed and racialised distinctions make certain female bodies overly sexualised, too available and 'out of place' (Puwar, 2004; Skeggs, 2004). The signs of Anna's femininity and sexuality made her visible in public space, even as she tried not to make her body look too available. According to Tani (2002), in a historically working-class neighbourhood, local residents may juxtapose their own self-presentation as 'ordinary' or even 'unattractive' Finnish housewives against the racialised and classed femininity of 'Russian women' who are associated with commercial sex. Anna's experience suggests that her phenotypical whiteness was insufficient to pass as a respectable female subject, her femininity and sexuality being cast as too remarkable or excessive.

However, it is not the clothing per se that make women sexually remarkable, but rather the body wearing it. While attending an event for women engaged in commercial sex organised by an NGO, Diatlova asked one woman about her experience of getting access to social services:

'I've never had any problems with that', [the woman, in her 50s] said. 'It's all about how you present yourself. If you look like a prostitute...' She pointed out a young black woman standing by the stage door, talking to a man. 'See, if I dressed like her, it would be very different. I'm not the same age.' I looked over at the young woman. She was wearing a short white lace dress and high-heeled shoes. The dress, from what I could judge, was from [mainstream fast-fashion retailer]. The woman was rather tall, and the heels made her look even taller. But other than that, she looked like any other Finnish girl out on a Friday night.

This interaction in the field highlights the importance of self-presentation for Russian-speaking women and their concerns about external judgement. Like Krivonos' research participants who take care to look 'modest', Russian-speaking women who engage in commercial sex curate their appearance to avoid looking like and being perceived as 'prostitutes'. According to Diatlova's interlocutors, a short lace dress on the body of a young black woman would not necessarily be contextualised as a marker of commercial sex, but the same dress on the body of an older Russian woman would.

These narratives demonstrate that racialisation is a process of discovering and learning about one's racialised difference. Our observations suggest that Russian speaking women's knowledge of what constitutes respectable attire comes from their encounters with the white gaze, through which their bodies are judged and policed. Racialisation also involves the process of coerced learning about one's own position. The ostensible whiteness of Russian-speaking women is not unmarked and invisible, but requires constant effort to curate their attire, and these efforts may not gain approval from others. We shall discuss the idea of 'looking Russian' in more detail in the next section.

6. *Looking Russian?*

Existing research addressing notions of ‘looking Russian’ among Russian-speaking migrant women (Kopnina, 2005; Gurova, 2015; Wara and Munkejord, 2018; Lönn, 2018) often discusses dressing styles in terms of *difference* from the majority population. While the ‘European’ style is described as ‘modern and edgy’, the Russian style is associated with glittery fabrics, high heels and excessive make-up (Gurova, 2015: 102). We argue that there is a need to consider *why* this difference is perceived as significant, and why clothing and appearance are discussed so much among Russian-speaking women themselves. Our analysis aims to reorient inquiry into racialised hierarchies of judgement that conceive Russian femininity as less valuable.

Alena gave a detailed account of what it means to look like a Russian girl:

I can always distinguish a Russian girl in a crowd. There is something particular in their way of dressing up, which is not so nice. These tights of a beige colour, black ankle-high boots with a worn-out heel – it is clear that this is a Russian girl. For instance, some haircuts or a hair-do like choppy bangs – this is a Russian girl. At first, I did not know about that, but now I have learnt to define them.

What is striking about Alena’s account is her detailed knowledge of what it means, in her opinion, to look like a Russian girl. She has *learned* what it means to ‘look Russian’, and this gained knowledge of her own cultural ‘difference’ has been interiorised. Alena was clearly dis-identifying herself from the description of other women: ‘Russian girls do not wear parka jackets [pointing to her own parka], they wear fur coats or leather jackets with elastic.’

Alena’s knowledge of what it means to look Russian is not simply aesthetic but is juxtaposed against the norm of Europeanness that Finnish girls are thought to embody: ‘Finnish girls sometimes look really bad, but they look more European. They wear a scarf, UGGs or Converse shoes, jeans and a parka.’ Knowledge is always implicated in power relations, and the respectable aesthetic is closely connected with notions of Europeanness (Skeggs, 2004; Keinzi and Lewicki, 2019). Alena describes a ‘European girl’s look’ as less feminine and having greater symbolic value owing to its Europeanness, although, in her opinion, it may look ‘really bad’ from a purely aesthetic point of view. Although femininity is not explicitly pronounced in these accounts, the ‘Russian look’, in its perceived excessiveness, is excluded from the Western circulation of familiar symbols and brands.

When Krivonos asked Alina if she had experienced negative treatment because of her background, she responded: ‘It is not that I have ever felt discriminated against, but the main thing I have decided is not to dress up in vulgar ways and in no case mess with men at workplaces.’ Here again, Russianness is associated with a particular kind of femininity, which for Alina involves flirty behaviour with men. What is prominent in Alina’s account is that she shifted the

focus from the question about discrimination and the majority population's ideas on minoritised populations towards her own responsibility for conducting herself in a way that would not be associated with stereotypes of Russian femininity and female sexuality. The practice of self-distancing from certain behaviours is common among Russian-speaking women attempting to claim more acceptable social identities following migration (Sverdljuk, 2009).

Our research participants frequently and routinely referred to vulgarity when describing their lives in Finland and when thinking of their looks in relation to 'looking Russian'. Clothing was a site of racialised differentiation commonly judged and commented on by others. For instance, Karina told Krivonos about how she planned her outfits:

Once we went out to a restaurant. I did not want to wear a T-shirt and jeans, so I wore a classic black dress, nothing vulgar, everything covered. So when we came to a restaurant, one Finnish girl asked me why on earth I decked up like that. Another time, I went out to the cinema with my [Finnish] boyfriend. I wore a nice dress, not vulgar, but then he said, mocking me: 'Are we going to a wedding or what?' We had a fight after that.

While repeatedly referring to vulgarity and distancing herself from images of excessive femininity, Karina's looks were always commented on by other people as being too feminine and festive. Her navigation of space was, in this regard, interrupted by other people's comments on her body expression. The relationship between particular bodies and clothes becomes particularly clear to Russian-speaking women at border crossings:

Every time [I cross the border], I'm afraid. Obviously, I don't bring anything illegal with me. They could check my bags. But all my clothes are going-out clothes, beautiful, with a *décolleté*. Obviously not for Finland, if I'm going to visit a boy. If they start questioning me about that. There are high-heeled shoes. So very much not Finnish. Not for living with one man. That's why it's always unpleasant to cross the border.

A Russian-speaking woman crossing the border from 'East' to 'West' is interpreted as somehow suspicious; if her bags are checked and certain items of clothing are found, she may be deemed sexually unfit to enter Finland. Although sex work is not illegal in Finland, entry may be denied. The same clothing in the bag of a Finnish woman crossing in the opposite direction would probably not be interpreted in the same way. The interviewee characterised her clothing as non-Finnish, but more tellingly she added that this was clothing deemed inappropriate for monogamy. Previous research also documents how Eastern European women's migration and border crossings have been represented as an inevitable path to commercial sex (Andrijasevic, 2007).

7. Conclusions

Previous discussion has focused on the role of sexuality in constructing the European self and the non-white Other, and the colonial formation of these depictions (Fanon, 1965; Scott, 2007; Fassin, 2010). In this article, we have attended to the position of ostensibly white yet overly sexualised bodies of Russian-speaking women living in Finland. Although sexualisation is an experience shared by the majority of women, we have demonstrated that racialisation goes hand in hand with portraying migrant Russian-speaking women as sexually available and less respectable than white majority women. We have shown how Russian-speaking women seek to validate their bodies following migration, particularly by distancing themselves from what they call 'vulgarity', mercantility and excessive sexuality. Even when they adopt aesthetic markers of acceptable forms of Western femininity, they struggle to distance themselves from the 'whore' stigma, because the stigma is attached to the racialised body. We have demonstrated that Russian-speaking women acquire knowledge of their own racialised position and carefully navigate acceptable and unacceptable forms of gendered self-presentation. These findings suggest that Western/Nordic national gender and sexual norms may exacerbate marginalisation of non-Western Others.

We have argued that the efforts to navigate acceptable forms of gendered self-presentation is part of a process in which gendered and sexualised bodies reflect colonially produced white Europeaness and 'othered' Eastern Europeaness. Constructions of gendered, racialised and sexualised bodies rely not only on the white/Other binary, but on a graded (post)colonial formation of the European space itself. Drawing on discussions of postcoloniality in Eastern Europe, we have suggested that discussion of postcoloniality in Europe should examine how the politics of gender and sexuality mediate hierarchies within Europe: how racialised hierarchies within Europe are cast into hierarchies of femininity.

If normative (Western) Europeaness has recently been constructed through somewhat emancipated sexuality, the bodies of Russian-speaking women are not fitting the norms owing to their perceived sexualised body expression. This, we have argued, points to the policing of white femininity, which is sexually 'liberated' but respectable. This is not to suggest, however, that white femininity is a stable norm, or that white women are unaffected by sexism. Rather, we have argued that sexualisation acts as a disciplining tool when applied through racialised distinctions; racialised Eastern European femininity serves to reaffirm the norm of white Western – and Nordic – femininity. Semi-peripheries play an important role in maintaining the core, as Eastern Europe is a buffer mediating the distinction between the (Western) European self and its radical non-white Other (Blagojević, 2009; Wolff, 1994). Ostensibly white (yet overly sexualised) Eastern European femininity maintains the elusive boundary of white, Western femininity, which must be available to the male gaze but only to a certain degree. In this regard, respectable availability is a marker of Western civilisation.

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